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AUTHOR Ott, C. Ann
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ABSTRACT

Pondering the purposes of family stories and transcribed dialogues between family members raises an insight or two concerning the attainment of literacy. For instance, an exchange between two elder members of a family, one a former school teacher, the other a Ph.D., illustrates the spirited nature of arguments in the family. The school teacher never allows the other's academic success to intimidate her, and will use any rhetorical device that comes to her mind to win her point. Potentially serious intellectual issues are explored through humor. Another dialogue recorded en route to a family reunion in 1989 illustrates that family conversations are rhetorical contexts in which knowledge is explored and challenged. It also shows that two of the participants share a decided concern about correctness in language use that younger members of the family are less concerned about. Also, certain stories preserve family history and identity and are told to reinforce the family ethos--that members of this family are smart, good looking, and hard workers. The relevance of these observations to composition studies lies in the fact that American society is still socially stratified. Writing instructors might also ponder the danger of categorizing their students and the value of using composition as a service course. (Contains nine references.) (TB)

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Narrative and Literacy:

The Functions of Family Stories and Dialogues

C. Ann Ott

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Aunt Mimi is telling me a story about my grandmother I've never heard. I had called her to verify a bit of family history, and as usual, she's gone off on a tangent. "Didn't I tell you this story about her before?" she teases. I make her start over.

In 1886 my grandmother Eliza was expecting to spend a third year as an eighth grader in the Kentucky village school where she'd been teaching the first-graders. The teacher told Eliza's mother Eliza could not come back because the children learned better from her than from the teacher. The teacher was afraid the parents would find out and she'd lose her job. Sometimes when Mimi tells the story, Eliza stayed in the eighth grade two years, sometimes three. But the ending is always the same: the teacher tells her mother that Eliza can't come back, and Eliza cries for days. She never got over it, Mimi tells me. This story reminds me of Stuckey's observation that ". . . literacy is a weapon, the knife that severs the society and slices the opportunities and rights of its poorest people." (118)

My grandmother has always been a role model for me--I grew up listening to her stories of little girls, wolves and bears--but this story reinforced my belief that she was a key person in the development of literacy in my father's family. Eliza's gender accounts for her exclusion from further education, since her stepfather, whose interests were drinking and women, would not have considered sending even a bright daughter away to secondary school. Mimi carries on the tradition by telling the

story, and allowing me to interrupt and ask questions.

The connection between the development of literacy and storytelling has been a growing interest of sociolinguists for some time and is examined by Hymes and Cazden who remind us that narratives in the classroom are usually a privilege reserved for the teacher unless students produce stories that conform to an accepted pattern. Heath would agree. DiPardo observes that English teachers are uncomfortable with student narratives and asks, "How did composition specialists in particular become so distracted from an area that should so uniquely concern them?" (61) She describes narrative's denigrated role in rhetorical heirarchies, questions the assumptions on which this lesser role is based and argues for the need to develop narrative competence, citing cross-disciplinary studies that show that "the best thinking and writing . . . are at once personal and public." (59)

I analyze here some features of the development of my relatives' literacy by pondering the purposes of a story and two dialogues transcribed from taped interviews conducted in 1989 and 1991.

But first let me give you a little background. The family life my parents experienced while they were growing up was radically different from the middle class childhood they provided for me. My Kentucky grandparents had ten children over a 25-year period; my father was the youngest. As a result, their household was multigenerational--children and grandchildren coming and

going on weekends and during the summers, food cooked when people arrived hungry, beds made up when people got sleepy, and older children taking care of younger ones.

Family members had, and still have, mock arguments and compete in telling stories. Although Eliza only had an eighth grade diploma and George may have finished the fourth grade, six of their children finished college, two had master's degrees, one started a doctorate before he was killed in Korea, and my father has a Ph.D.

No doubt my relatives were born at the right time and rode the flood of widening college enrollment in the 1920s and 1930s. But I have often wondered what happened within the family that helped them take advantage of the opportunities. I've also wondered about the extent to which there was a cost for them in alienation from their communities of origin--if what Winterowd has said is true, that "in conferring literacy, you are destroying a past . . ." (21) My grandmother never quite understood the culture her children moved into. There was this little brook of alienation they all waded through to communicate with each other.

The analyses I make here are my constructions around the stories my relatives shared with me, which they told in response to my questions. What I came to realize is that objective family truth is of secondary importance. Stone observes, "Attention to the stories' actual truth is never the family's most compelling consideration. Encouraging belief is." (7)

The first is a teaching story told by Mimi, one of the most accomplished storytellers in our family. Mimi is 86 and taught elementary school in Kentucky and Indiana for more than 40 years.

> It was the fourth grade and he was about two or three grades behind, so, uh--he was about 13, and kind of big. And he always waited 'til everybody got in line, then he went to the front and pushed everybody back and he got in front. And they didn't do anything. He was the biggest one in the room--big as I was.
>
> And I said, "William Earl Harrison Baker go to the end of the line. You've pushed your last push. And he walked clear back to the back, and he whispered, "Why don't you go to hell." And I could have just ignored it, like I didn't hear it, and I thought, well, that's what I'll do. And then I thought, by George, I'm not going to let him get by with it. So, I said, "You go back to your seat, William Earl Harrison Baker, and I'll deal with you"--he loved to be called his whole name--"and I'll talk with you when I get back."
>
> So I came back, and I said, "I heard you." Well, he said, "I kinda didn't want you to hear me and I kinda did want you to hear me, because I'm used to gettin' in the front of the line--I'm bigger than they are, and I belong in the front of the line."
>
> So, I said, "We're going to the principal's office." Said, "Sure. I knew you'd whip me. Gonna take me in there for ol' Miss (name) to whip me."
>
> Well, we were almost to the door, and I said, "No, I think we'll just go back and talk." And I didn't know a bit more what to do than a jack rabbit, because I was 20 years old and wasn't trained very well.
>
> So we went back and sat down and talked. I said, "The thing about takin' you in there and whippin' you--have you ever had a whippin'?"
>
> Said, "By God, I get more whippins than anybody in this school. I been whipped in the first grade, in the second grade, in the third grade--over and over again." So, he said, "Let's go get my whippin' over with."
>
> I said, "We don't need a whippin'. But," I said, "I think that was pretty bad, and if you go to the front of the line, you have to earn the front of the line--you can't ever push again." And I said, "Now, why don't you go out and play and have a good time. This is the end of it."
>
> He said, "When you goin' to punish me?"
>
> And I said, "I'm not going to punish you--we're all through. And if you never mention it to me again, I'll never mention it to you."
>
> Well, he went out and played, but he just couldn't

understand it--he would just kind of look at me and shake his head. So two or three days later, he was somewhere in line and I was in the back, and I came back and he put his arms out and said, "Move, kids, and make way for the queen."

Well, he went to sleep every day. Every day he went to sleep. And (principal) would come in and she'd say, "Do you let the children sleep during school?"

And I said, "I think he needs the rest more than he needs--I can't teach a child that's that sleepy."

So I kept him that day at recess, and I said, "Willie, why do you go to sleep every day? What time do you go to bed?"

And he said, "Well, my father sweeps the streets at night. And we can't start sweeping, I think, until 10 o'clock, and we get through like at two or three. And I go to bed after that." And said, "I don't get much sleep."

So I went in and told (principal) that we had to make provisions somehow for Willie to sleep at school. And she said, "Well, that's very unorthodox." Said, "I just never heard of anybody having a cot and sleeping at school." And I said, "I will buy the cot if you'll let me put it in the teacher's restroom." There wasn't any place to put it. And she said, "Well, I guess I better talk to the superintendent about it." And I said, "I'd rather you didn't, but you can talk to anybody you want to about it--I don't think a child that sleepy can learn."

So we got the cot. And when he came at 8 o'clock he went to bed, and I think he slept about three hours. And then he was alert enough to learn the rest of the time."

Mimi's teaching stories are entertainments, but they are also meant to teach my sister, brother and me family values, such as that it's important to "treat people right," to honor people who've been important to you by helping others inside and outside the family.

Mimi and my father, who is six years younger than his sister, often engage in friendly, spirited debates. Mimi never let my father's academic success intimidate her, and will use any rhetorical device that comes to her mind to win her point--whether they're arguing about whether Abraham Lincoln was "madly in love" with Ann Rutledge, or how much money a person should

keep in their checking account. I think this characteristic interaction is a clue to the development of literacy in our family. The following mock argument illustrates how a potentially serious topic is explored through humor.

Ann: What are your objections to her being the head of the family?

Dad: Well, I think sometimes she shows a degree of instability.

(Mimi laughing)

Ann: Instability?

Dad: She changes her mind.

Mimi: I don't change it enough.

Dad: There are. . .

Ann: Well, do you mean she says everything that she's thinking sometimes while she's trying to make a decision?

Dad: Yeah. And she carries too much luggage when she travels--that's. . .

Mimi: I will agree with that. Now that's the only bad thing. . .

Dad: How many wigs have you got--three?

Mimi: Only two: my old one so I can take a nap. You know it ruins the back out when you. . .

Ann: Yeah, it would.

Dad: You don't. . .take your wig off when you take a nap.

Mimi: In the car and let Ann see me with no wig? Never.

Ann: I love the wigs. Well, when is this vote going to be taken?

Mimi: I think the day I'm 90.

(Ann laughing)

Mimi: And I only have you--you're the only one promised to vote for me.

Dad: Well, we agreed to put it up to vote at the family reunion.

Mimi: Well, most of them are a little closer to me than they are to you, but you can't tell about people, some of them--sometimes they're traitors.

Dad: Well, you know a lot of the people that will be there will not be able to vote.

Mimi: Oh--all of my side, all of Orpha's side don't get to vote.

Dad: No.

Mimi: Why--why can't they vote?

Dad: Well, because they would be prejudiced.

Mimi: Oh, they would.

Ann: Tom, are you going to abstain? Is that what you said?

Tom: Yes, I'm abstaining.

Mimi: You're going to vote for your 82-year-old aunt. Your father's not old enough to be head of the family. He hasn't live as many years as I have.

While Mimi and Dad have been allies since they were small, other alliances were just as strong. For this kind of generative dialogue to develop, siblings had to feel they could take license with language. I am guessing that my father and aunt felt they not only had permission to speak out from observing the dynamics of their parents' relationship--one also characterized by energetic but friendly exchanges--but that their parents and older siblings enjoyed and encouraged a certain amount of drama.

An old story that illustrates how power was negotiated is about my grandfather doing the grocery shopping. According to Mimi and Dad, Eliza never shopped for food "a day in her life". She told George what to buy, he walked to town, caught up on local news, and made his purchases. My father reports that the times his mother checked the purchases against her order were the closest his father ever came to swearing. Grandmother would take the things out of the bag and invariably say, "You forgot the baking soda." "Oh, for conscience' sake, Mama," George would say, "You don't need that!" This line my father and Mimi repeat with pleasure, and re-enact when my father shops for Mimi and declares he eyeballed the entire laundry aisle at the local grocery and could not find the Stain Stick.

The following dialogue, recorded enroute to our family reunion in 1989 when I was a journalist, illustrates how family conversations are rhetorical contexts in which knowledge is explored and challenged. It also shows that Mimi and Dad share a decided concern about correctness in language use younger members of the family are less worried about. This is because they were aware early in their lives that language use is a social marker, and they didn't want to be excluded from contexts they wanted to enter.

Mimi: It is 'an historical' isn't it?

Dad: It's 'an,' 'a' 'n,' before an 'h'.

Mimi: Well, would you mind telling me why Paul calls me down

every time I say, "An horrendous--I had an horrendous time." He said, "That's incorrect." And I said it wasn't. And he said that I make the fewest grammatical errors of anybody he knows.

Dad: Well, you tell him that you do--you, uh,...before a vowel or an 'h'. . .

Mimi: Well, but 'h' is not a vowell!

Dad: Huh? Before an 'h'. . . it's 'an', not 'a'.

Mimi: But that's not a vowell, and that's what he claims.

Dad: O.K.

Mimi: But I think it's correct. I know it's 'an historical,' and if it's 'an historical,' it has to be 'an horrendous.'

Tom (my brother): You could say, uh, you could skirt the issue, you could say. . .

Mimi: Say you had a bad time?

Tom: . . . a truly historical one.

(laughter)

Tom: By putting the 'truly' in there, you can get. . .

Mimi: Well, how're you going to get around horrendous?

Tom: A 'real horrendous time.'

Dad: A 'truly horrendous. . . '

Tom: A 'horribly horrendous time.' Well, you don't say 'an horribly horrendous time,' do you?

Mimi: Well, the 'a' is in front of the 'h'. I don't think you better put 'horribly' in.

Tom: Maybe we should stop saying words that . . .

Mimi: . . . just say you had a bad time.

Ann: Well, you could look it up in the style book. Now you could look it up in the Chicago Manual of Style, or you could look it up in the Associated Press Stylebook, or you could look it up in the United Press International Stylebook

. . .

Mimi: Look it up for me when you go back.

Ann: . . . or you could look it up in Strunk and White . . .

Mimi: I don't have any of those.

Ann: . . . or you could (laughing) . . .

Mimi: Will you look it up when you go back?

Ann: . . . and they won't all say the same thing.

Mimi: Uh-oh. One time when we were teaching . . .

Dad: What do you use at Foster's Daily D?

Ann: AP.

Dad: AP style ma . . . Is it printed up?

Ann: Sure. And we have to have a copy on our desk and I must refer to it ten times a day.

Mimi: Associated Press.

Tom: That's what, uh, is that really, literally? You mean you just happen to need to?

Ann: I need to. You just can't commit all of that stuff to memory--it's just too tedious.

Mimi: You keep on doing it, pretty soon you'll . . .

Dad: All right, Ann, uh, do you . . .

Mimi: C., do you have to go this fast down this hill and scare me?

Dad: . . . roman quote or italicize the names of ships?

Tom: You'd capitalize them.

Ann: Neither--it's just, uh, names of ships . . . are capitalized. I think.

Dad: You mean the whole--every letter in the name?

Tom: No, first letter.

Ann: No, first letter.

Dad: Well yeah, you capitalize it, but do you put it in quotation marks? or, uh, do you italicize it?

Ann: No, you don't italicize it and you don't put quotation marks around it.

Dad: You just capitalize it?

Mimi: What's the sentence?

Tom: And you put 'USS'. . .

Dad: A ship, the name of a ship.

Mimi: Well, give me a sentence.

Dad: Uh, the, uh, Hudson, sailed up the river. Hudson is the name of a ship.

Mimi: That's all you do is capitalize it.

Dad: No, no.

Tom: There usually . . .

Dad: Chicago manual italicizes it.

Ann: But the A, the AP doesn't.

Dad: They capitalize it and italicize it.

Ann: AP doesn't. See, that's why . . .

Dad: O.K.

Ann: . . .everything is different.

Dad: Uh, do they give you a copy of that AP style manual?

Ann: They most certainly do.

Dad: You have any extra ones lyin' around?

Ann: Well, I gave my old one to Chuck. They revised it, and so they bought us all new copies. So I gave him the old one. But he has to use the--whatever it is--uh, psychologists' manual of style. That's a whole 'nother bag

of . . .

Dad: Uh-huh.

An interesting feature here is topic control--although Mimi introduces the topic, Dad takes over and at one point cuts Mimi off when she starts to tell a story. I also see gender and generational differences in the kinds of language use--more playful between my brother and aunt, more business-like with Dad. For Dad, rules and facts hold dominion, and he believes that testing my memory of these things is a legitimate way to measure my authority. As Stuckey says, ". . . the arbiter of education is the test." (118) Both my aunt and my father show high interest and some frustration in identifying authorities for language use and are perplexed that experts differ about some standards.

Certain stories preserve family history and identity, and are told to reinforce the family ethos--in our case, that we are smart, good looking, hard workers and resourceful. In promoting this family image, conflicting information has been suppressed about members who might be alcoholic, unsuccessful, naughty, unattractive, epileptic, retarded--any number of perceived conditions that cause the "tense standstill" Stone describes (98). "We are not entirely free to challenge the family's beliefs as we might challenge any other system of belief," Stone writes. (101) Her last chapter is a tribute to the necessity for some to do that, especially if the family script includes suicide, working oneself to death, or other painful scenarios in

need of revision.

In trying to understand how alienation operates in my family, I have turned a wistful ear to the early part of this century--before college degrees, jobs and status tended to scatter us. But I suspect I might be idealizing the relationships.

What could any of this mean for us as composition teachers? Herzberg observes that" . . . the class structure of the United States has not changed significantly during the past one hundred years despite a significant rise in the average educational level of the populace." (104) And Stone comments, "American society may be more difficult than most to get a handle on because there is so much rhetoric about democracy, so much public denial of social hierarchy." (145) Mimi's question could be applied to our profession as a whole: How are we going to get around horrendous? What happens when we categorize students? How do we get beyond reproducing the class structure? How does seeing composition as a service course hook into that? And how will we meet the increasing cultural diversity in our classrooms?

Like Margo, one of the women Stone interviews, I feel "this push behind me from these women who never had the chance." (27) I think our students should be famous to us, their stories treasured for what they can teach us. Their pasts, our pasts, are open to re-interpretation and evaluation, and empower us to connect with difficult texts and realities, make change. Trinh Minh-ha speaks of the power and joy in storytelling. But there

is more: "Understanding, however, is creating, and living, such an immense gift that thousands of people benefit from each past or present life being lived. The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being." (119)

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